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Viewing cable 06PARIS1251, FORMER PRIME MINISTER RAYMOND BARRE SHARES

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06PARIS1251	2006-02-28 17:32	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Paris
Appears in these articles: http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/documents-wikileaks/article/2011/02/09/wikileaks-les-visiteurs-de-l-ambassade_1477418_1446239.htm				

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PARIS 001251

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DEPT ALSO FOR EUR/WE, DRL/IL, INR/EUC, EUR/ERA, EUR/PPD,
AND EB
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2015
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [EU](#) [FR](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [ECON](#)
SUBJECT: FORMER PRIME MINISTER RAYMOND BARRE SHARES
INSIGHTS FROM A HALF-CENTURY IN POLITICS

REF: A. (A) PARIS 1113
[1](#)B. (B) EMBASSY PARIS DAILY REPORT FOR FEBRUARY 17
[1](#)C. 2006
[1](#)D. (C) PARIS 953

Classified By: Ambassador Craig Stapleton for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In a February 21 meeting with Ambassador Stapleton, former prime minister Raymond Barre cautioned against any overconfidence that right-wing, nativist and xenophobic sentiment in France might be something of the past. If anything, in Barre's view, popular reaction to urban unrest and other recent events may have strengthened this current in public opinion. Barre said President Chirac's avidity for power was such that Chirac, circumstances permitting, might yet decide to pursue a third term in office. Barre called Interior Minister Sarkozy "courageous" in his willingness to confront -- and articulate -- the hard choices facing France. Barre discounted PM de Villepin's chances of winning the center-right nomination, and criticized the Socialist Party's "unrealistic ideology" on tax policy, labor market reform and economic growth. He thought Segolene Royal could win the Socialist Party nomination if "the French are really fed up and intent on something new," viewed former PM Jospin as her most likely rival, and excoriated former PM Fabius's decision to advocate rejection of the proposed EU constitution to further his presidential ambitions. Barre was confident that Europe would overcome its current crisis "like all the others" because economic interests had always proved stronger than the "political disagreements of the moment," although he

faulted lack of British devotion to the European idea, blaming it on the UK's attachment to its privileged relationship with the U.S. End summary.

KEEPING THE EXTREMES AT BAY, ESPECIALLY THE FAR RIGHT

12. (C) Over lunch with Ambassador Stapleton on February 21 former prime minister Raymond Barre articulated a vision for governing France from the center, keeping policy pragmatic and on an even keel managing -- indeed, manipulating -- the ever-present extremes so they don't become powerful enough to skew policy in ideologically driven, vindictive directions. He called these extremes -- both the "ideological left" and the "extreme right" -- "permanent currents in French public opinion." Barre was particularly firm in cautioning against the latent strength of the extreme right. Suggesting that the current of opinion driven by nativist fears and xenophobic reaction could be catalyzed "around immigration," he said these sentiments could boost support for National Front (FN) leader Jean-Marie Le Pen notwithstanding Le Pen's advancing age and the fading of his ability as a populist firebrand.

DON'T WRITE OFF PRESIDENT CHIRAC

13. (C) Barre said he had known Chirac for "forty years" and that the intensity of Chirac's desire for power was such that "it would not surprise me if Chirac decided to run again." In Barre's view, for Chirac -- as for others, like Mitterrand, who climb to the top and stay there -- "politics is combat," and succeeding requires "equipping oneself with whatever it takes." As an example, Barre pointed to Chirac's "equipping himself" with the mayoralty of Paris and transforming it into a powerful engine for generating support for the political machine that was key to Chirac's successful first election to the presidency in 1995. (Note: Chirac served as mayor of Paris from 1977 - 1995. End Note.) Barre added that Chirac's tremendous talent for projecting himself as a regular guy with whom everyday French people identify could, under the right circumstances, keep drawing significant electoral support.

14. (C) As unlikely as such a stab at a third term might seem, Barre said he detected that Chirac was carefully positioning himself in case. Barre noted the uncommon prominence in the media recently of Bernadette Chirac, who, Barre said, "has long enjoyed strong popularity." He also mentioned a series of articles and video reports that have appeared lately with details about the Chiracs' adopted (Vietnamese refugee) daughter and other, positive, aspects of the presidential couple's private life. Most interestingly, Barre pointed to Chirac's electoral base in France's rural and agricultural sector, and observed how Chirac had carefully engineered an agreement with France's EU partners that would keep intact the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (and therefore also the subsidy regime so beneficial to French farmers) until 2012 -- the very year he would leave office after a third term.

CHIRAC AND IRAQ -- CHOOSING THE POPULAR OVER THE RESPONSIBLE

15. (C) Barre was scathing in his criticism of President Chirac and then Foreign Minister de Villepin's handling of France's opposition to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in early 2003. Barre said that Chirac, sensing the popularity of "going against" the U.S., irresponsibly overplayed France's opposition to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) "just to benefit from public opinion." In retrospect, Barre implied, the damage done to the trust that must obtain between two allies if they are to confront differences and work together effectively was clearly not worth the temporary lift in approval ratings Chirac (and Villepin) achieved for themselves. Barre, adding that he believed the U.S. had acted precipitously and made a serious strategic error in undertaking OIF, underlined that France could well have firmly registered its misgivings as a concerned ally, without the grandstanding, veto-wielding opposition indulged in by Chirac and Villepin. Barre speculated that President Mitterrand would have handled France's misgivings about OIF in such a subtler, more responsible way. The Ambassador and Barre agreed that in recent months, U.S.-France relations had returned to "normal," as a result of careful cooperation across a range of continuing issues, along with the emergence of new, shared challenges, particularly in the greater Middle East.

SARKOZY AND VILLEPIN

16. (C) Barre placed the current vying among would-be presidential contenders in the context of what he called "the problem of France's political class," specifically "their inability to enlighten public opinion." He excepted only Interior Minister Sarkozy from what seemed his blanket

pessimism about the political elite's obsessive electoral competitiveness and lack of talent for leading public opinion to a better understanding of the challenges and options facing the country. Even as he called Sarkozy "courageous" -- in the sense of being willing to confront the hard choices facing France and un-varnishedly presenting them to the French public -- he also cautioned that public opinion had best not be led too brusquely, however honestly. His advice to Sarkozy would be to "tone down the 'rupture' rhetoric" lest he frighten away potential support.

17. (C) Barre (like most experienced politicians who have commented to us on the matter) discounts the chances of Prime Minister de Villepin prevailing in his rivalry with Sarkozy, unless Sarkozy grievously stumbles -- or is tripped. Very much tracking with the conventional wisdom, Barre observed that Sarkozy's control of the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party, and the firm support for Sarkozy among party members make it difficult for any center-right presidential hopeful to dislodge Sarkozy as the UMP standard bearer. However, Barre also added that "people just run on their own" -- there is nothing preventing someone like Villepin, if his ambitions should drive him to it, from putting together an organization and launching himself as another candidate in the first round of the 2007 election. Barre also commented that the political enmity between Chirac (and Villepin) and Sarkozy is of the sort that brooks no quarter, and implied that Chirac was, as intently as ever, watching for the opportunity to torpedo Sarkozy's chances of succeeding him.

ROYAL AND JOSPIN

18. (C) Barre observed that Socialist Party (PS) First Secretary Francois Hollande was "in a bit of a pickle" --

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caught between the presidential ambitions of his longtime domestic partner, Poitou-Charentes Region President Segolene Royal, and his longtime patron in PS, former prime minister Lionel Jospin. In recent weeks, Jospin has been ever more overtly "running on the sidelines," alongside the pack of declared contenders for the PS presidential nomination (ref B). Barre speculated that "Segolene against Jospin" might be a face-off the PS might not be able to avoid come its presidential primary next November. Barre (unlike most experienced politicians who have discussed Segolene Royal's presidential prospects with us (refs A and C)) did not dismiss her chances of staying in the race and winning election as France's first woman president. Barre said, "if the French are really fed up and intent on something new, they could very well vote for her." Barre, however, also raised the possibility of "the reprise of the 2002 election that should have been," and indicated that the French political system's insular inertias and murky deal-making could produce a "Jospin versus Chirac" second round in 2007.

IDEOLOGY, OPPORTUNISM, AND REASON ON THE LEFT

19. (C) Turning his attention to the difficulties that the center-left PS is having declaring itself a normal, social-democratic governing party, Barre contrasted the "reason" of former socialist finance minister Dominique Strauss-Kahn with the "opportunism" of former socialist prime minister Laurent Fabius. (Note: Both Strauss-Kahn and Fabius are among the declared candidates for the PS's presidential nomination. End Note.) Barre spoke highly of Strauss-Kahn, insisting on, in Barre's view, the admirable realism of what would be Strauss-Kahn's economic policy-making, notwithstanding Strauss-Kahn's "socialist" political orientation.

10. (C) By contrast, Barre was unsparing in his criticism of Fabius for opportunistically pandering to the ideologically motivated left of party. (Note: In a transparent effort at building a base in the left of the party, Fabius was the only center-left heavyweight to advocate rejection of the proposed EU Constitution last May. End Note.) Barre reviled Fabius' decision to "betray his own convictions against the interests of his country," and advocate rejection of the proposed EU Constitution in order to further his own presidential ambitions. Returning to his theme of the importance of keeping extremes under control, Barre lamented the damage done to France by economic policies driven "by the ideological left." In particular, Barre identified misguided soak-the-rich tax policies and "hyper-Keynesian" fiscal policies as having stunted business investment and led to "excessive" -- debt-fueled and unsustainable -- state investment in social services and infrastructure.

THE BRITISH ARE NOT EUROPEAN AT HEART

11. (C) Observing that he had been "personally involved in European affairs since 1959," Barre said that he was confident that Europe's current crisis over rejection of the proposed constitution would also be overcome "like all the

others." Barre said that, at each of the regularly occurring crises that have marked the history of the European construction, "everybody says Europe is finished." "Not at all," exclaimed Barre. Notwithstanding the political differences driving these crises, he averred, the underlying dynamic of "ever more closely intertwined" economic and commercial interests always trumps the "disagreements of the moment." Barre however, added that differences with the British might make the exception to this rule, observing that "the British will never be wholeheartedly European." He suggested that a key part of this lack of genuine commitment to a political Europe on the part of the British was due to their wanting to "privilege" their special relationship with the U.S.

MITTERRAND -- "GREAT ADVENTURER" OF FRENCH POLITICS

12. (C) Recalling his political battles against Socialist President Francois Mitterrand -- and returning to his theme of "politics is combat" that requires "equipping oneself with whatever it takes" -- Barre called Mitterrand a "great political adventurer," who commandeered the socialist party "because he had tried everything else, and this was the only means" for him to achieve power. Barre, while admitting that getting to the top and staying there "requires compromising with financial interests," made a point nonetheless of insisting on Mitterrand's fundamental integrity. Barre made clear that he believed Mitterrand (and Chirac) -- while definitely not personally enriching themselves -- had knowingly allowed serious financial impropriety aimed at keeping politically damaging secrets secret and at keeping campaign war chests full. Even so, Barre said that Mitterrand remained admirably true to one or two core convictions, such as his patriotism with regard to France and his commitment to European integration and its promise of lasting peace. Mitterrand, according to Barre, subjected all else to the exigencies of getting into power and staying there, including his political convictions. "He was a socialist like I'm the Pope," said Barre of Mitterrand, who led France's Socialist Party for over a quarter century.

NOTE AND COMMENT

13. (C) Barre is an economist by training who served as prime minister under President Valery Giscard d'Estaing from 1976 - 1981. Barre unsuccessfully ran for the presidency in 1988, coming very close to edging out Chirac as the center-right's candidate against Mitterrand. Though associated with the centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF), Barre never joined any political party. Barre served as mayor of Lyon from 1995 - 2001. He eloquently evoked the "Radical Socialist" (i.e. moderate socialist) civic spirit that animates the inhabitants of the city, and contributes to the high quality of life enjoyed by city residents. He also evoked the city's centuries-long history as a trading and banking center due to its silk industry, and suggested that Lyon's success attracting European and globally oriented companies was in part due to its outward-looking, commercial heritage. Throughout his discussion with Ambassador Stapleton, Barre exemplified the realism and probity that almost made him president notwithstanding his rejection of political partisanship. End note and comment.

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Stapleton